

SEEKING HALAL FOOD IN THE U.S. THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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The relationship between religion and the market is important to understand as globalization increases and the nation-state loses influence on markets in comparison to other institutions including religious institutions (Kale 2004; Mittelstaedt 2002). In particular, transnational religion-based consumer practices can exert a strong influence in the evolution of the market and vice-versa (Izberk-Bilgin 2012; Sandicksi and Ger 2010). Web-based communities play an increasingly important role in nurturing transnational consumer practices (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008), including religion-related consumption practices. To explore these issues, we use the search for halal food in the U.S. as a focal point to investigate the role of social media in connecting and mediating religious communities and markets, with implications for the effect of these negotiations on quality of life.

The growth of Muslim residents in the U.S. (Pew Research Center 2011), combined with a growing Muslim tourist market (Jafari and Scott 2014), has led to an increasing demand in the U.S. for halal food. Halal food-- i.e. food that is permissible under Islamic law—not only has religious associations, but is often perceived to be healthier, tastier, and more hygienic by Muslims (Regenstein, Chaudry, and Regenstein 2003). In large U.S. cities, such as New York City and Chicago, and areas with large concentrations of Muslims, such as Dearborn, Michigan, halal food is relatively accessible, but in other places, obtaining halal food can be a challenge. Even in places in the U.S. where halal food can be easily purchased, regulation of halal standards is not uniform, and, since halal is a credence product attribute (Bonne and Verbeke 2008; Grunert 2002), assurance of halal standards can be shrouded in uncertainty. Increasingly long and complex logistic chains make it difficult to ascertain the “purity” of the food (Tiemann et al. 2013), leading to widespread concern that large proportions of the meat and poultry sold as halal have not been prepared properly, violating people’s trust and religious beliefs (Regenstein, Chaudry, and Regenstein 2003). Altogether, a number of factors can make procuring halal food a challenge in the U.S.

The growth of demand for halal food worldwide (Robinson 2013) has led to a number of studies investigating the consumption of halal food in non-Islam nations. Studies in the U.K. (Ahmed 2008) and Belgium (Bonne and Verbeke 2008) show that Muslims prefer buying halal meat from a Muslim vendor to buying from a supermarket for reasons of confidence. Ahmed (2008) confirms that the most important qualities in evaluating halal meat are authenticity and trust. A study in France emphasizes the diversity of attitudes of Muslim consumers toward halal meat consumption, labeling the four types of consumers as “indifferent,” “concerned,” “confident,” and “Islam idealist” (Bonne et al. 2007). The importance of the role of social norms, in addition to attitudinal variables, for the prediction of the intention of the purchase of halal meat means that Ajzen and Fishbein’s (1977) theory of planned behavior effectively models halal food purchase, at least with two European samples (Alam and Sayuti 2011; Bonne et al. 2007). As a

whole, these studies point to a nonuniformity in attitudes of Muslim populations toward purchasing and evaluating halal foods and a difficulty in ensuring halal standards in geographic regions that are not majority Muslim.

The objective of this research is to explore how social media platforms are being used by consumers to overcome barriers to obtaining halal foods. While other studies have examined the use of social media websites by Muslims (Al-Mutawa 2013; Mishra and Seeman 2010), our investigation focuses on the use of social media tools to elicit information on halal food in the U.S. Our netnographic study (Kozinets 2002, 2010) analyzes consumer-to-consumer comments from websites that include reviews of U.S. restaurants that serve or potentially serve halal food. Altogether, six websites were analyzed: two Islam-sponsored websites (the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America [INFANCA] and Muslim Consumer Group for Food Products USA and Canada), the halal food page of the review site Yelp, a review site exclusively for halal restaurants (dine-halal.com), and two consumer managed websites (zabihah.com and halalapalooza.com).

Just as Muslims are not a monolithic group (Ahmed 2008; Jafari and Suerdem 2012), halal food seekers are not using the internet for monolithic reasons. We found at least five distinct groups of users accessing websites, each with different levels of experience and rationale guiding their searches. These include Muslim Americans who are permanent residents of the nation; transient visitors in the U.S. for an extended period of time; Muslim tourists; relatively recent converts to Islam; and non-Muslim hosts who need tips on accessing halal food for Muslim guests. We identified three major barriers to accessing halal food that social media sites help to overcome: physical access, questions of authenticity, and questions of quality. In addition, we classified a number of types of information that social media provides for consumers to navigate the line between "purism" and "pragmatism" (Fischer 2008) in the market for halal food.

The findings hint at broader issues related to the how social media websites may intercede in the intersection among religion, markets, and consumption. Our results show that the emergence of social media platforms appears to provide a valuable new tool for people searching for and evaluating halal food. On a macro level, this tool has the potential to moderate the relationship between religion and the market in a number of ways. For example, there is evidence that the internet may not only serve to provide a source of information for those seeking knowledge about halal food, but also play a role in increasing the visibility and appeal of halal food, and, by extension, Islam. In addition, the ongoing dialogue among consumers with a diversity of allegiances to standards of halal, suggests that social media has the potential to play a role in altering standards for consumers of what is acceptable to eat, and, by extension, altering standards of what it means to be faithful (Mittelstaedt 2002). Another important role for social media is to function as a community-based arbitrator of standards. Just as other web communities have sometimes served to regulate corporations and act as whistle blowers (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008), the opportunity and threat provided by the public evaluation of halal authenticity could lead retailers to tighten their standards, or, alternatively, abandon pretenses of offering halal food altogether (e.g. McDonald's in Dearborn, Michigan [Waarikoo 2013]). Further, these developing web communities may serve a vital role in allowing identity construction (Sandicksi and Ger 2010) and overcoming the "marginalization" that may be associated with being a minority populations (El-Bassiouny 2014). At the same

time, while dialogue on the internet can reinforce Muslim identity, it might also lead to fragmentation of communities by serving to cement different factions of Islamic consumers (Sandicksi and Ger 2010). In summary, as the case of seeking halal food in the U.S. via the internet demonstrates, social media tools have the potential to profoundly alter the synchronic relationship between religion, the market, and consumption.

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